

South Australia

Academy of Middle Schooling

This Year 8 program aims to help learners to develop 21st century learning skills such as risk taking and resilience. The program actively encourages learners to discover their preferred learning style and exposes them to unfamiliar styles, such as: working on an interdisciplinary task in a flexible group, responsible use of ICT, independent learning, deep inquiry, etc. Students work on personalized learning programs and receive orientation from mentors and teacher engagers. The figure of the traditional teacher has disappeared from this plan, although the option of traditional learning is still open for those learners slower to adapt to the innovation.

Main focus of innovation: TEACHERS, CONTENT, ORGANISATION

Other keywords: technology-rich

General Information

Name of the ILE: Academy of Middle Schooling

Location/Address: Birdwood High School, Shannon Street. Birdwood, South Australia 5234

Website: www.birdwoodhs.sa.edu.au

ILE submitted by: South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services

Rationale

Why do you suggest that it should be included in the project? How does it respond to 21st century learning challenges?

Birdwood High School *Academy of Middle Schooling* is an example of innovative educational practice. There has been a deliberate shift away from more traditional structures for organising learning, towards those that more accurately reflect the world in which young people live. For example, the practice of grouping 1 teacher with 25 students in an isolated classroom has been discarded in favour of a more flexible learning suite, where 120 students share the space with 6 ‘teacher engagers’ working with an interdisciplinary and personalised approach to learning.

The *Academy of Middle Schooling* has intentionally embraced innovation for the purpose of school transformation, rather than engaging in school improvement through incremental steps. As a result, the educational offering has become genuinely learner-centred, with the development of a personalised model, in which each student will experience different learning opportunities through interactions with a variety of people, in different ways, and at their own pace. A ‘community of thinking’ has evolved where creativity and innovation, on the part of both students and teachers, are encouraged and supported. Students can immerse themselves in pursuits for which they have natural talent and genuine passion. The relevance of student learning has contributed to significant improvement in their level of engagement.

The process of innovative transformation extended into assessment practices. The *Academy of Middle Schooling* has adopted a strong focus on ‘Assessment for Learning’, including ensuring that learning intentions and criteria for success are explicit. Students are afforded significant flexibility in their choice of presentation of work for summative assessment, as well as the opportunity to re-submit as many times as they like to achieve their full potential. Teaching staff actively engage learners through questioning and dialogue, providing feedback to enable learners to make progress towards learning goals. As a result, students’ feelings of ownership of their learning have grown, and they have begun to make use of each other as teaching resources.

The program has already observed numerous positive outcomes.

- More Year 7 students are interested in attending Birdwood High School when they begin Year 8. The Year 8 enrolment increased from 115 in 2010, to 160 in 2011.
- Student attendance has also increased from 91% to 96%, with a lower rate of truancy.
- The incidence of behaviour management issues has decreased by 83% leaving more time for teaching and learning.
- Teachers have reported that students are more deeply involved in their learning, saying that their students are ‘totally absorbed’ in the work, rather than simply compliant in the process.
- Students are becoming noticeably more focused, more confident to take risks, more engaged in deep learning, more self-aware, more interested in self-improvement, better and more confident communicators, as well as better at providing feedback to others and accepting supportive, critical comment about themselves.

Learning Aims / Intended Learning Outcomes of the ILE

What are the core learning aims and which knowledge, skills or attitudes are to be acquired? (These may include outcomes related to learners' social, interpersonal, or meta-cognitive development)

The 'learning community' of the *Academy of Middle Schooling* believe that learning is optimised when:

- Students understand their preferred learning style, strengthen their non-preferred learning styles, and are able to self direct and plan their learning. Life-long learning skills are considered to be a critical feature of 21st century living.
- Students feel safe and valued by those in their learning community. These communities vary in size depending on the nature of the learning. Inclusivity, respect and interdependency are actively nurtured.
- Students have time to explore learning to greater depths and levels of sophistication. This is enhanced by an experiential, inquiry based and integrated learning environment.
- Students have ready access to current information and communication technologies.
- Students have core strengths in literacy and numeracy. These fundamental skills are essential for deep inquiry.
- Students are allowed to embrace and nurture their passions. This passion can be used to shape their curriculum and lead to excellence in their learning journey.
- Students recognise the value of resilience. Through risk taking, incorporating both success and failure, powerful learning and greater understandings will be achieved.
- Students have the ability to self assess. To be self critical and to persist in aiming for higher standards is the key to genuine rigour in learning.
- Students also recognise the power of peer assessment. Authentic feedback allows for purposeful modification to achieve improved learning outcomes.
- Students reach 'need to know' learning points in their learning journey. When students recognise that to move forward they require specific knowledge and skills they make a greater commitment to understanding them.
- Students develop understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge and gain a greater depth of understanding of the world around them.
- Students are actively encouraged to develop their creative thinking skills, to open the many avenues of thinking, to become innovative thinkers of the future.

Upon graduating from the *Academy of Middle Schooling*, students will have developed the following personal attributes and skills. They will:

- be persistent and resilient;
- be an independent learner who is able to self reflect;
- have highly developed communication skills;
- have the ability to solve problems, to think and create in a variety of contexts, by drawing on their interdisciplinary knowledge;
- have highly developed organizational skills and the ability to manage time effectively;
- have high levels of self confidence based on having achieved success;
- work effectively with others and demonstrate leadership potential;
- have a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy; and,
- use ICT effectively as a tool to enhance their learning.

Learners

Which group(s) of learners is it aiming at? Who is eligible to take part? How many learners are there? What are their ages?

Birdwood High School has a total of 700 students, grouped into Learning Academies of under 130 students. These small groupings mean that each students can be personally know by their peers and the supporting adults, such that school can become an extension of a caring family for each student. Within this context, students can grow emotionally and socially, and as a result, can succeed academically.

In 2011, Birdwood enrolled 160 Year 8 students – 75% chose to engage in the *Academy of Middle Schooling*, while 25% chose to remain in a Learning Academy in which they undertake a more traditional Junior High School program. The 40 Year 8 students who chose the traditional program are placed in a ‘home group’ and attend lessons in the same discrete compulsory subjects as a whole class. The 120 students who chose to enrol in the *Academy of Middle Schooling* will experience the innovative approach to learning implemented here.

Year 8 and 9 students who do not wish to engage in the new innovative (alternative) program, the *Academy of Middle Schooling*, participate in a regular Junior High School Program and are grouped into their own Learning Academy within the school. Although the students do not get the benefits of the innovative learning program, the grouping increases their sense of identity by providing a designated ‘home base’.

Year 10 students are grouped into a Transition Academy intended to support their transition from Junior School to Senior School. The focus of this Academy is the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in their chosen pathway. Senior students (Years 11 and 12) are grouped into one of 5 Learning Academies on the basis of their chosen subjects and associated career aspirations.

Facilitators

Who are the teachers/facilitators? Who are the leaders? What are their professional backgrounds? What are their roles?

Birdwood High School has 45 teaching staff and an additional 15 support staff. The principal is supported by three Senior Leaders (Middle Schooling, Pre-University Academy, and Vocational Academies) who oversee the curriculum, student behaviour management and daily management for each of these sub-schools. There are ten middle managers (Coordinators). While these roles have previously been heads of faculties / discipline areas, they now hold Academy based support positions. The focus is on the learning needs of the students in each of these Learning Academies.

The Academy of Middle Schooling has numerous staff, divided into four key roles.

- *Mentors* – Fourteen teachers act as mentors, adopting a ‘family’ of students. They work with them to develop personalised learning programs, support assessments and give feedback on both formative and summative tasks. Their role is also critical in developing powerful relationships with their groups. Each mentor is responsible for about 8 students. These groups have formal ‘Learning Circle’ meetings three times each week.
- *Teacher Engagers* – These teachers are allocated to the *Academy of Middle Schooling Learning Suite* to assist individuals and groups with whatever learning task they are working on at the time. Their role is to engage the students in learning conversations. This varies depending on the particular tasks. Teachers may be required to listen, question, respond, advise, facilitate, coach, instruct, support, challenge or motivate. As a result, the school has chosen to call these staff members ‘teacher engagers’.
- *Focus and Master Class Teachers* – Many of the staff involved in the *Academy of Middle Schooling* as Mentors and Teacher Engagers, also teach Focus or Master Classes.

These are usually conducted in specialist facilities outside the main Learning Suite. The teachers’ role during these sessions is to instruct and facilitate a short course. Students can choose to enrol in these. Of the 6 teachers assigned to the *Academy of Middle Schooling* at any one time, four would usually be acting as Teacher Engagers within the main Learning Suite, while two take Focus or Master Classes in specialist areas.

The staff of the *Academy of Middle Schooling* comes from a variety of backgrounds. Some are specially trained middle school teachers, others are from strong traditional secondary schools, and others have primary teaching experience. There is a balance of genders and a full range of years of experience. In 2012, the number of teachers involved in the *Academy of Middle Schooling* will double to accommodate the expansion to include Year 9 students.

Student support

Birdwood High School employs a range of School Service Officers who work with individual students with special needs, modifying and supporting their work as required. These students may speak English as a second language, or have identified learning or social difficulties.

Further staff are provided where required for support in special interest areas, such as dance, art (including a professional cartoonist) or history and are paid an hourly rate for their services.

Organization of the ILE

How is learning organised? How do learners and facilitators interact? What kind of pedagogy do they follow? What curriculum is used?

Student groupings and allocation of teachers

Learning within the *Academy of Middle Schooling* at Birdwood High School is not divided by subject area, nor are groups of 25 students controlled by individual teachers in discrete classrooms. Instead, groups of 120 students are allocated to six educators/teachers at any one time. Around 80 of these students and four of these teachers would be working within the Learning Suite (an open plan learning space) on activities specified in their Individual Learning Plans. The remaining students would be working with the other two teachers for specialised learning activities, such as Master Classes.

Student Choice

There are some key principles in the organisation of learning in the *Academy of Middle Schooling*. Firstly, students have total choice in who they wish to work with, what aspect of their learning they wish to engage in at any point in time, which learning space they would like to work in, which teachers they wish to access and for what purpose, how long they spend on a task, and how they will demonstrate their learning. Student choices are scaffold at first, but will become increasingly self-driven as the year progresses.

Curriculum

- Integrated Themes – Units of work which transcend traditional subject boundaries. The school intends the discipline areas to become more integrated over time, allowing students to engage in more open-ended investigation, negotiated with individual students. These investigations are intended to enable deep inquiry and research into interdisciplinary themes relevant to adolescent learners. Three examples of integrated themes explored at this stage include:
 1. Creating my middle school: Student have investigated what middle schooling is, what a flexible learning suite might look like and engaged in designing and building their own.
 2. Rebel with a cause: This unit explored famous ‘persisters’ and engaged students in research into their cause and how they promoted it.
 3. Healthy self: Issues such as friendship, healthy eating and how the brain works (including learning patterns) were explored in this unit.
- Individual Learning Plans – Students plan, negotiate and design their own learning program through their own learning plan. A key feature of this process is the use of daily journals. At the beginning and end of each school day, students write an entry in their journal to outline their success in achieving their goals the day before, as well as set targets for the new day. Students have the opportunity to transfer this information to a planner. Each student is assigned a mentor who they spend time with primarily during Learning Circles three times each week. Mentors focus on aspects of learning progress, as well as assist with organisation, motivation and planning.
- Creative passions – Units of work in which students are encouraged to immerse themselves in pursuits which they are genuinely passionate about. This work is undertaken through negotiation with the students’ mentor and may be linked with other learning activities from a range of traditional subject areas.
- Assessment For Learning – This type of assessment practice is a central and innovative feature of the *Academy of Middle Schooling*. As the name suggests, this approach to assessment is intended to add value to learning activities, and provide the opportunity for the breadth and depth of student learning to be fully demonstrated.

As a result of less time spent on behaviour management and explicit instruction, teachers are able to spend time with individual students assessing through questioning and dialogue their learning progress. Detailed assessment criteria are provided to students in order to make clear the learning intentions of particular activities. Assessment for learning also includes significant peer and self assessment through regular self-reflection and sharing of learning. As a result, students become far more aware of their abilities, engaged and feel a greater sense of ownership of their learning.

- Technology – ICTs are used every day by both staff and students to communicate, access the internet for research, present work, access teaching via podcasts and use a variety of software applications. All students have either purchased or have access to an Apple Macbook laptop, and the entire school has wireless coverage.
- Literacy and numeracy – Students are engaged in literacy and numeracy learning within all activities in the *Academy of Middle Schooling*. However, more explicit learning activities and instruction is provided to small groups of students according to their ability level.
- Focus Classes – Technical Studies (Woodwork, Electronics, Solar Vehicles, Metal Work, Technical Graphics and Automotive) are provided as specialised Focus classes for students to choose if and when they wish. The same system is applied to student choice of Home Economics, Music, Art and foreign language.
- Master Classes – Again, optional specialised classes are provided, but in more complex subject areas. Examples include managing a café or other business, being a dessert master chef, African drumming, hip hop dancing, Australian history, news journalism, science ‘Mythbusters’ and algebra.
- Physical activity – Physical activity is compulsory for all Middle School students. They can choose from traditional sports (for example, football, cricket, netball, tennis), or they can choose options including games and relays, dance, aquatics, circus skills, bushwalking or rock-climbing. At this stage, more than 60% have chosen to engage in the more traditional sports.

N.B: Assessment within topics is based on grids (Gardner multiple intelligences & Blooms taxonomy). Students choose various tasks across dimensions valued at 50 points. Explicit upfront assessment criteria are used. Presentations to peers/teachers and sometimes parents occur. For further detail on assessment please refer to Middle School curriculum handbook (see annex 1). An example of an assessment grid is provided in annex 2.

Learning Context

In which context does learning take place? What does the physical learning environment look like? Are community resources used to facilitate learning and how?

Birdwood High School does not have a purpose built facility to house its Academy of Middle Schooling. However, through creativity, the school refurbished some traditional teacher-centred classroom spaces into learner-centred flexible learning suites. The learning environment has been ‘built’ by the students in collaboration with mentors, teacher engagers, school support officers and parents. For instance, within the Learning Suite, the school’s students created their own learning spaces.

- *Cave Spaces*: Quiet spaces for individual reflection and study, places where students are allowed the time and space to think.
- *Watering Holes*: Meeting places where students can share ideas and learn from each other. These are stimulating areas where students working as part of a Learning Team to collaborate on projects. Not only are students in these spaces learning from each other, they engaging in social learning.
- *Camp-fire Spaces*: Small areas designed for learning from an ‘expert’. Explicit teaching occurs here when requested by the students. The ‘expert’ does not have to be an adult.

- *Da Vinci Studios*: These are part artist studio, part science laboratory and part model building shop. It is a place with access to water, where students can complete inventive, experimental, messy projects.
- In addition to these spaces our Academy of Middle Schooling students can access a limited number of outdoor learning areas. The school has plans to build some more.
- Media presentation spaces and visual display surfaces can be accessed and reconfigured daily by students within the Middle School learning suites.
- The focus and master classes are conducted in traditional high school facilities, including Art rooms, Technology Studies workshops, Home Economics kitchens, drama performance spaces, Agriculture laboratories and grounds, specialist music and media suites, gymnasiums, and sporting grounds.

Partnerships

Regarding the partnerships, Birdwood is a country high school in the Adelaide hills and closely involved with its community. The whole school is based on academies, with those in senior school having a vocational focus, including hospitality and small business. There is a strong focus across the school on catering for local events.

The Middle School students run the café as a business. To be part of the enterprise students must complete the 'barista masterclass' which was run as an addition/alternative to traditional Home Ec classes in semester 1.

42 students have now completed this course. More students have chosen to do this master-class in semester 2.

There is a theory component as well as learning to make coffee & run a business. See attached worksheet 'Barista & café assignment.docx'. Note the 5 different levels of thinking specified. This is to ensure higher level thinking tasks are included.

The students have run a number of weekend fundraisers by running the café at other events e.g. Birdwood Primary School 'Farm Day'. They have used this money to buy furniture for the Middle School learning spaces which they are still creating.

There is an executive board of directors – 10 students who will oversee the running of the café. See attached 'Café job descriptions.docx'.

Students had to write job applications for these. Over 50 were received (some students put in for multiple jobs).

Some positions involved appointment on the strength of their application & confirmation from referees, others however, the level of competition was so high & quality of applications so good that further processes were needed to split the applicants.

Eg for the CEO there needed to be a formal interview process; for the head barista there were 5 shortlisted applicants to train another student (from a higher year-level that they didn't know) in how to use the coffee machine & they were judged on their communication skills, ability to explain complex processes and the quality of their graduates ability to make an espresso, long black, café latte, cappuccino & hot chocolate; the shortlisted marketing manager applicants had to come up with 3 possible names for the café, associated logos & appropriate advertising campaigns.

They then needed to pitch these ideas to a panel. The shortlisted head chef applicants were given a mystery box (idea stolen from ‘masterchef’ TV series) from which they had to create a sweet treat suitable for selling in the café.

History of ILE

Who initiated it? For what reasons was it started and with what purpose? Have these changed since?

Birdwood High School is a government school within the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS). It is situated in the Adelaide Hills, 30kms from Adelaide city, the capital of South Australia. Birdwood High School is a leading centre for education in agriculture and viticulture, as well as being host to an Industry Pathways program and two Trade Training Centres – one in the area of hospitality (Food processing with a focus on bakery, cheese making, chocolate making and small goods production) and the other in automotive and engineering. Birdwood High is a school that, despite being zoned “metropolitan”, remains a school with strong country values within the Adelaide Hills. Over many years the school has developed an excellent reputation. It strives to cater for the needs of all its students in a caring, friendly, collaborative and success-oriented environment.

Staff at Birdwood High has been concerned about the ineffectiveness of traditional approaches to schooling for at least ten years. During this period, many have experimented with various middle schooling philosophies and teaching strategies to address significant challenges at this level. For example, in recognition of the importance of strong student-teacher relationships and the need to create opportunities for interdisciplinary learning, students were taught by the same teacher in their core subjects for a whole school year. More recently, the school was selected to participate in the innovative South Australian Learning to Learn programme, and so embarked on a significant range of contemporary staff training and development programmes.

By 2010, the school was ready for significant change, inspired by professional development experiences and encouraged by a new principal. While there were pockets of teaching and learning excellence, this was not consistent across the whole school. Furthermore, staff were frustrated by the inability of the ingrained traditional high school structure and timetable to enable the middle schooling initiatives being trialled to reach their full potential.

After discussions, research and an interstate trip to visit existing innovative school sites, a tentative proposal was prepared and presented to the school leadership group and then later to all staff, and to parents on the school’s Governing Council, where the concept gained significant support. Most importantly, the proposal was to create an *Academy of Middle Schooling* that would be offered (initially at least) as an alternative, rather than replacement, to the regular junior high school programme. This approach was intended to allow participation on the part of both staff and students to be optional.

The original proposal was reviewed and outlined in greater detail by a steering committee of 24 volunteer staff through a consultation process with parents and with the Regional Team from the education department. The programme was promoted to the community, to Year 6/7 students from feeder primary schools and their parents. Interestingly, question time after presentation of the programme at these sessions (which often went for over an hour) was focused on teaching and learning, rather than on buses, uniforms and diaries which had formed the bulk of parent questions in previous years.

At this stage, the *Academy of Middle Schooling* includes Year 8 students only. But, the intention is to expand the program to include Year 9 students in 2012. Of the 160 Year 8 enrolments in 2011, 120 (75%) chose to engage in the new programme, while 40 chose the traditional junior high school model.

As a result of providing this innovative alternative for junior students, Birdwood High School restructured the entire school population into groups termed ‘academies’.

There are five academies for senior students (divided according to subject choices and career aspirations), as well as a transitional academy for Year 10 students.

Funding of the ILE

How is it funded?

The school is funded by the standard state government process. No additional funding has been allocated to this project than would have been spent on the traditional Junior High School. From the outset of the program, it was decided that the program must be sustainable within the school's resources. However, the Governing Council (via its Finance Committee) allocated \$30,000 in seed funding for 2011 so that the *Academy of Middle Schooling* could be established. A significant amount has also been spent on staff training and development, as well as fixtures, fittings and furniture to establish the new Learning Suite. A number of student run enterprises (including the Middle School Café) should provide modest income into the future, along with parent contributions through fundraising activities.

Learning Outcomes

What are the learning outcomes achieved by the ILE, including academic, social, interpersonal and meta-cognitive outcomes? How is learning assessed?

The *Academy of Middle Schooling* was established only this year. As a result, there is little evidence from formal assessments or evaluation to determine its success. Over time, the national standardised literacy and numeracy testing will be rigorously analysed and compared to previous years, regional groupings and State and National averages. Furthermore, the school has systematically collated baseline data from numerous sources from which to gauge progress in the future, particularly in comparison with the students engaged in the traditional Junior High School program. These data sources include:

- ACER PAT Maths, Science, Spelling, Vocabulary and Comprehension.
- Teaching for Effective Learning (TfEL) Student Engagement Survey
- Circle of Courage Wellbeing testing
- BLAZE PLTs (for testing creative thinking, effective participation, independent enquiry, reflective learning, self-management and team work)
- Fitness testing

Some positive outcomes from the program have already been observed.

- More Year 7 students are interested in attending Birdwood High School when they begin Year 8. The Year 8 enrolment increased from 115 in 2010, to 160 in 2011.
- Student attendance has also increased from 91% to 96%, with a lower rate of truancy.
- The incidence of behaviour management issues has decreased by 83%, leaving more time for teaching and learning.
- Teachers have reported that students are more deeply involved in their learning, saying that their students are 'totally absorbed' in the work, rather than simply compliant in the process.
- Students are becoming noticeably more focused, more confident to take risks, more engaged in deep learning, more self-aware, more interested in self-improvement, better and more confident communicators, as well as better at providing feedback to others and accepting supportive, critical comment about themselves.

Further anecdotal evidence at this stage indicates that the program has already had some success. The school has received letters from parents praising the influence of the program on their children. For example, one parent explained that their daughter has gained confidence, become enthusiastic about learning for the first time in many years, and has overcome learning and memory disabilities that have disrupted her schooling for some time. The principal of a neighbouring school has indicated that the innovations undertaken at Birdwood High School have focused attention on changes to learning in feeder primary schools. Teachers at the school have noted already an improvement in student engagement, a reduction in behavioural issues, and an increase in ownership and enthusiasm for learning.

Documentation describing or evaluating the ILE

Is there documentation on this learning environment? Is there a website? Films? Research reports or evaluations? Other forms of documentation? (please supply references or links)

Attachments are:

2010 Annual Report

Academy of Middle Schooling brochure

Example of an integrated unit: 'Creating my Middle School'